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Advice and Student Agency in the Transition to Middle School

Patrick Akos
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Abstract

In response to the 2000 Virginia state writing prompt, eighth grade students wrote a letter of advice to a sixth grader coming to middle school for the first time. A purposeful sample of more than 10,000 writing responses was collected. Content analysis of a random sample of 350 responses revealed themes of advice for students negotiating the transition to middle school. Content analysis revealed that organizational themes were mentioned more frequently than personal/social or academic themes. The most frequently mentioned themes in each category were choosing and changing classes or electives, improving study habits, and making and managing friends. Data also revealed wide diversity in advice and a robust sense of student agency, including recommendations of student attitudes and attributes that were deemed important for new middle school students. Implications for middle school personnel are discussed and future research directions are presented.

School districts have assorted configurations (e.g., K-8, 9-12; K-5, 6-8, 9-12) that have evolved from the one room school house into a complex variety of elementary, primary, middle, junior, and/or senior high schools. There is reason to believe that middle schools in particular are gaining an important place in the American educational system. Middle schools have increased 55% over the last 30 years. In North Carolina, for example, the traditional junior high school has all but disappeared and has been replaced by middle schools (which make up 94% as compared to 15% in 1977) (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1995). Along with continued emergence of the middle school, educational reform (e.g., No Child Left Behind) and middle school reform (e.g., *Turning Points*) continue to shape and impact the educational process. One particularly important phenomenon related to the changing configurations and the emergence of middle schools is the type of transitions created between levels of schooling. Most students now move between different contexts that are present in elementary, middle, and high school.

Specifically, the transition from elementary to middle school has become a frequent topic in practice and research literature and the transition has often been characterized as a risky endeavor. To date, much of the research has provided warnings about the influence and outcomes associated with the transition. Research has demonstrated that students exhibit decreases in self-esteem, academic achievement, and motivation (Anderman, Maehr, & Midgley, 1999; Aspalgh, 1998; Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Harter, 1981; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). Additionally, the transition to junior high or middle school has been associated with increases in behavior problems (Eccles & Midgley, 1989) and increases in psychological distress (Chung, Elias, & Schneider, 1998; Crockett, Peterson, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993).

Many of these investigations have explored and speculated reasons for the risk associated with the transition

to junior high or middle school. The magnitude in change from elementary to middle school, the mismatch between developmental needs and school ecology, and the dual timing of personal and ecological transitions have been offered as explanations. Since puberty includes a variety of physical, emotional, and cognitive changes, the intensity of individual development may alone serve to magnify the challenge in adjusting to the ecological change in middle school. Changes in scheduling, lockers, electives, increases in homework, new and more teachers, and new and larger peer groups are but a few structures that mark the ecological changes that coincide with the transition into middle school. Eccles et al. (1993) suggest that a poor person-environment fit exists between individual developmental needs and the practices of most junior highs or middle schools. Others have examined transition effects in terms of anchor points (Koizumi, 2000), role strain (Fenzel, 1989), classroom environments (Feldlaufer, Midgley, & Eccles, 1988), sociometric status or social support (Fenzel & Blyth, 1986; Hirsch & DuBois, 1992; Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1995; Wentzel, 2003), family involvement (Grolnick et al., 2000) and curriculum articulation (Galton, Morrison, & Pell, 2000). Regardless of the type of factor or theoretical explanation, individual and ecological changes are prevalent issues.

While the elementary to middle school transition has demonstrated risk, not all research has replicated the negative outcomes (Berndt, 1987; Fenzel & Blyth, 1986; Proctor & Choi, 1994). This suggests that some students remain resilient and cope with change and/or receive ecological support that may serve as a protective factor. The conversion from the junior high model to the middle school concept may be one influential factor. Several middle school reforms are aimed to promote early adolescent development and provide opportunities for personal growth (Turning Points, 2000) that may rectify the poor person-environment fit (Eccles et al., 1993). Previous research has shown positive outcomes in well-organized and supportive school environments (Felner, Ginter, & Primaue, 1982). Further, Ruble and Seidman (1996) found contextual variables, including the pedagogical organized middle school, related to the absence of generalized risk for the transition to middle school. In addition to ecological factors, authors have speculated that demographics factors (e.g., race, SES) are influential to the transition experience. Data has established pronounced achievement losses and distress for Latino students (Akos & Galassi, in press; Wampler et al., 2002) and greater achievement declines for African American (Rice, 1997; Scott et al., 1995) and low socioeconomic students (Grolnick et al., 2000). With potential variation in transition outcomes, it would be incumbent for school personnel to understand specific student needs during the transition.

To understand student needs, many have turned to examining student perspectives in qualitative interviews or surveys. Galton and Morrison (2000) suggest that awareness of student perspectives is crucial to provide teachers and policymakers with an effective means to support transitions. Student perceptions are also important because parents or teachers often perceive the transition differently. While research (Akos & Galassi, 2004) discovered some similar themes in perceptions among stakeholders, others have discovered that teachers' perceptions of student transition worries are not significantly correlated with student worries (Brown & Armstrong, 1982). In fact, parents often communicate warnings rather than positive information about middle school (Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992). Further, Elias, Gara, and Urbiaco (1985) demonstrated that "administrators wildly misperceive the nature and impact of middle school entry on their students and undervalue" key sources of support (p. 116). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) describe that a child's perception of difficulty in transition is phenomenological and therefore, can not always be perceived accurately by people in the child's environment.

Research on student perceptions has revealed a range of intensity and type of concerns in the transition to middle school. Concerns over homework, getting lost, being on time, lockers, bullying, and getting good grades have been mentioned as specific concerns (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Lord et al., 1994; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; Weldy, 1990; Wells, 1996). Studies have also revealed that students report more difficult courses, stricter teachers, more rules, and more difficulty making friends after the transition (Scott et al., 1995). Both academic and social concerns have been high priority in related studies (Diemert, 1992; Mitman & Packer, 1982). In addition to concerns, research has discovered positive student perceptions for the transition. Students have identified friends, more freedom, changing classes, sports, and electives as the best aspects of being in middle school after a recent transition (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Odegaard & Heath,

1992). It seems that students approach the normal transition to middle school with concern and excitement, and that these perceptions vary according to a variety of individual, ecological, and methodological factors.

While these studies have been informative, they have used different types of research designs, instruments, and have typically been conducted in singular schools or school districts. Some of the results might also have been influenced by the types of checklists, questions, or prompts provided in the research. For example, in terms of research design, it is notable that student perceptions appear to change over the course of a transition. Students prior to and early in transition seem to be more focused on organizational aspects, while post transition concerns seem to linger more on academic and personal and social needs (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Brown & Armstrong, 1982). Similarly, prior to the transition, students' rate parents as more important and influential support than teachers, and then rank teachers ahead of parents after the transition (Akos, 2002). These types of temporal differences suggest that research on student perception may be different depending on the timing of the investigation. With varied data, continued research on how students perceive and negotiate the transition into middle school is useful.

This study examined the transition advice of eighth grade middle school students. Similar to previous research, a student sample provides an authentic description of student perspectives (first person account). This investigation uniquely examined seasoned or expert views on how best to negotiate the transition into middle school. The format of the data also provided information on student agency, or how students can take action or make efforts on their own behalf. This contribution that students make to negotiating the transition and the challenges associated with middle school has not received significant attention in school transition research.

Method

Data Sources

All students in Virginia completed a writing prompt for the 2000 Standards of Learning state assessment. The direct writing component is a part of the larger English subject area section of the exam for 8th grade students. In this direct writing component, students write a composition based on a writing prompt. The specific writing prompt for the exam in 2000 was "Imagine that the school counselor has asked your class to write a letter to a student who will soon begin middle school. What advice would you give to a new middle school student? Be sure to be specific."

A purposeful sample of the writing prompt responses was selected because they are "information rich and illuminative" (Patton, 2002, p. 40). The prompts represent student insight on important themes in the transition to middle school. While the information source is a homogenous group of 8th grade students, a purposeful sample of a heterogeneous group of districts were sought to maximize representativeness. Using school districts as a sampling unit, the selection process sought a diverse group of students (urban, suburban, and rural), in different geographic areas of the state, and in different size schools and districts. A total of seven school districts agreed to participate in the research. The sample included two rural, three suburban, and two urban districts.

From each of the seven districts, random samples of 50 compositions were selected for analysis. While the randomly selected sample was not necessarily representative of each district (e.g., because of the varied number of middle schools in each district), random selection of compositions was used to increase the credibility of the sample. A total of 350 compositions were selected for data analysis. This sampling procedure was done for a balance of depth (based on the number of prompts), breadth (number of diverse districts and random sampling of compositions), and feasibility for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with the primary researcher reading a random sample of 20 compositions not previously selected from various districts in their entirety to capture a larger picture of the data. Then, an inductive content analysis was conducted with each of the 350 compositions. Emergent patterns and themes were identified

in the compositions by breaking each composition into meaning units. Meaning units are defined as perceived shifts in the attitude or example of a response or a shift in the emotional quality of a response (Giorgi, 1985) and “the smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 345). These are not independent, but expressions of aspects of the whole response. Meaning units also allow researchers to “examine and describe meaningful constituents of the experience, staying as close to the data as possible” (Seidman, 1991, p. 69).

To increase credibility and reliability, multiple analysts and a data auditor were used. The primary researcher instructed two graduate students in school counseling using several sample compositions. The primary researcher and the two graduate students then conducted a preliminary and independent content analysis of the compositions. In each independent coding, triangulation with multiple analysts was included to enhance the rigor of the analysis. For example, each researcher had compositions (15) that were duplicated by other researchers. Then, working collaboratively, the researchers discussed coding to investigate when and why differences appeared to standardize coding procedures. A total of 45 randomly selected compositions were checked by multiple researchers and audited for agreement.

In the third stage of data analysis, a data reduction process was done to identify core consistencies in the identified meaning units. Meaning units were coded and tabulated for thematic meaning collectively by the researcher and two graduate assistants. Larger themes were identified from the most frequent responses emerging from the initial coding of meaning units. For example, numerous statements (e.g., “You will have to get used to changing classes”, “You don’t have that much time between classes”, and “Pick classes that interest you”) related to choosing and changing classes were collapsed into one theme. Responses not collapsed into larger categories were judged to be atypical and discarded.

Fourth, a deductive analysis was then used with the coded themes based on previous transition research. Research has demonstrated academic, organizational, and personal and social needs as core areas of need in the transition from elementary to middle school (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Schumacher, 1998). Academic themes refer to the academic demands, motivation, and the behavioral tasks that lead to achievement. Organizational themes refer to structure, procedures, and contextual elements in the environment. Personal and social themes refer to individual qualities and peer and social structures. These themes are not always dichotomous, and may influence one another, but have been utilized in previous investigations on student perceptions in the transition to middle school (Diemert, 1992; Mittman & Packer, 1982).

Using analytic induction, the researchers manually synthesized the coded themes into one of the three core areas. Researchers reread meaning units within themes in the context of written responses to assign themes based on the central thrust of the advice. A few themes appeared to be pervasive and were applicable to more than one category. For example, the theme of teacher relationships included coded meaning units that were related to academic (e.g., “Make sure teachers like you if you want good grades”) and personal/social (e.g., “Teachers will write you a pass if you get along with them”) categories. These meaning units were converged into the same theme, and teacher relationships emerged under both categories to identify the distinction in the purpose of the advice provided by the sample.

For the last stage of data analysis, a data audit was performed by two additional graduate students in school counseling. The auditors did not participate in any other aspect in the research procedures, but randomly audited 30 compositions for dependability in coding of meaning units and the conformability of labeling and collapsing of themes. Approximately 89% of coded meaning units and 94% of collapse themes were verified by the data audit.

Bias

While the written responses are authentic student perspectives (e.g., first person accounts), two significant forms of bias are notable. First, the data is derived from a state writing assessment completed in the classroom. Potentially, the testing environment did not allow for authentic responses by the participants. Students may have provided responses they felt would be “correct” for the test and/or ideas they heard previously from

school staff. Second, the primary researcher is a former middle school counselor and was familiar and sensitive to previous findings of school transition research. Even with independent coding and data auditing, graduate students were under the supervision of the primary researcher and the resulting description or coding of student perspectives may have been influenced by this relationship. Implications of bias in the results will be discussed below.

Results

A total of 2173 meaning units were coded from the 350 writing prompts. On average, 6.18 meaning units emerged per writing sample with a range from 3 – 11. When meaning units were coded into themes, 10 meaning units were atypical (e.g., “Don’t do what I did”) and were eliminated from further analysis. A total of 46 themes were created from the original 2163 meaning units. Meaning units were distributed among organizational (41%, n=885, 15 themes), academic (34%, n=744, 15 themes), and personal/social (25%, n=534, 11 themes) categories. The most frequent themes within each category are displayed in Table 1. The spread and distribution of data point toward three conclusions. First, the diversity of themes, 45 in all, reflects the diversity of advice in the data and the distribution across categories. Second, the large frequency in meaning units in the organizational category also suggests that organization advice was most relevant to students’ notions of adjusting to middle school. Also, perhaps due to the writing prompt being focused on advice or the sample of eighth grade students, a strong sense of personal agency emerged from the data. Specific categories are discussed below.

TABLE 1: Top Five Themes in Student Advice by Category

Categories	Themes	# of Meaning Units	% in Category	% Within Data
Academic N=744 34%	Study habits	121	17	6
	Do homework	119	16	6
	Teacher relationships	83	11	4
	MS work is harder	55	7	3
	Keep up grades	53	7	2
Organizational N=885 41%	Choose/change classes	121	14	6
	Follow rules	103	12	5
	Lockers	84	9	4
	PE	66	7	3
	Consequences	57	6	3
Personal / Social N=534 25%	Meeting new friends	104	14	5
	Be yourself	46	8	2
	Get along with others	31	6	2
	Have a positive attitude	28	5	1

Organizational Themes

A total of 885 meaning units and 15 themes were coded as organizational advice and comprised 41% of all meaning units. Within the organization category, the most frequent response mentioned was in the choosing and changing classes theme (n=121, 14%). For example, students emphasized taking electives and “you have control over your classes during scheduling.” To manage changing classes, one student advised “You will have to get used to changing classes. There are a lot of people and if you don't want to be tardy then you have to weave your way through.” Students also frequently mentioned knowing and following rules (n=103, 12%). Specifically, students wrote advice about gum chewing, fighting, skipping class, and following directions. One student noted that “all you need to do is behave and you won't get in trouble. Never talk back or be rude to a teacher. Don't chew gum.” Other frequently mentioned advice about organizational aspects of middle school included knowing about lockers (n=84, 9%), PE (n=66, 7%), and knowing the consequences of your actions (n= 57, 6%). For example, with lockers, one student stressed the need “to have your locker organized because you will always be able to find your work and will not have to take a zero for something just because you couldn't find it.” Students also mentioned “not to worry about lockers”, “write your combination and locker number on your hand or in your pocket”, and “do not waste time in the hallways at your locker because then you are late for class.” Students also wrote about enjoying PE (physical education class) indicating that “PE is cool because it lasts a lot longer in middle school” and “Gym is one of the easiest classes to pass.” Last, an example of knowing consequences was read, “Time-outs, referrals, tardies, they're everywhere. If you get too many time-outs you get ISS (in-school suspension) and if you get too many referrals, you get OSS (out of school suspension). If you get too many tardies, you'll get ISS. Don't mess around because that kind of stuff can get you a bad name.” Eleven other diverse organizational themes (e.g., lunch, home base, tardies) each comprised less than 5% of the total meaning units in the category.

Academic Themes

Advice on academics yielded 744 meaning units in 15 themes representing 34% of all of the meaning units. Most frequent on the list of academic advice was the need to study and improve study habits (n=121, 17%). For example, “teachers will give you pop quizzes, so you need to study a lot” and “study at least four times harder than you did in elementary school because if you do you will be prepared for any and all tests, quizzes, and pop quizzes.” Other frequent aspects of academic advice concerned doing homework (n=119, 16%), maintaining good relationships with teachers (n=83, 11%), the difficulty of the work (n=55, 7%), and keeping grades up (n=53, 7%). Specifically, students advised, “do your homework every night because one zero for a homework assignment will totally mess up your grade” and “Keep up with your work. Procrastinating is not tolerated in middle school.” “The teachers will respect you if you respect them” was a frequent message from the students. Writing about the difficulty of work, one student said flatly “In sixth grade you start to learn things, hard things.” Finally, writing about the significance of keeping grades up, one student wrote “Grades count and one little mistake can bring your grades down. You want to keep your grades up to pass.” Again, an additional 11 other diverse academic themes (e.g., strict teachers, pay attention in class) each comprised less than 5% of the total meaning units in the academic category.

Personal and Social Themes

Advice on personal/social aspects of middle school yielded 534 meaning units in 11 themes representing 25% of all meaning units. From these responses, the most frequent emphasis was upon meeting new friends (n=104, 19%). Advice focused most on “being nice to people is the best way to make new friends” and “try to get to know your classmates and talk to them, you never know you might like them.” Other advice indicated that “New friends make life a whole lot easier” and to try to be proactive in “Try to make a new friend before school starts so you can walk and socialize with them.” Another important personal/social theme was choosing friends carefully (n=46, 9%) and to be yourself (n=41, 8%). For example, one meaning unit read “Pay attention to who your friends are and if they make your grades drop, then you need to stop hanging out with them.” The notion of being yourself also complemented other ideas for personal agency, such as being nice and getting along (n=31, 6%), having a positive attitude (n=28, 5%), and making good choices (n=28, 5%). For example, students highlighted the need to be yourself, “Be yourself. You will get a lot of criticism from other students if you don't wear the latest fad. Wear the clothes that you like and do the things that you love” and “Being yourself is just walking down the halls with a load of confidence inside yourself; like believing in

what you have accomplished or are going to accomplish.” Additional agency meaning units included “be responsible”, “be yourself”, “don’t give up”, “believe”, and “look forward to new things.” One student wrote, “All you have to do is to take a deep breath, and look around you discover a place full of opportunities.” These are particularly notable, as they provide personal qualities that experienced students found important to a successful transition to middle school. As with previous categories, a diverse group of 10 other themes (e.g., extracurricular activities, increased freedom) each accounted for less than 5% of the personal and social meaning units.

Discussion and Implications for School Personnel

The wide diversity of themes within the data is consistent with the diverse, often contradictory findings in student perspectives in previous research (Akos, 2002; Akos & Galassi, 2004; Arosowafe & Irvin, 1992; Brown & Armstrong, 1982; Diemert, 1992; Mittman & Packer, 1982; Oeergard & Heath, 1992; Weldy, 1990). This diversity in findings may emerge for multiple reasons. For example, most previous student perception research is gathered from students in the midst of, or subsequent to the transition to middle school. The eighth grade sample used in this data is more removed from the transition experience, yet provides a unique perspective from veteran or experienced middle schools students.

Perhaps most important, the contradiction and diversity in the concerns, needs, and advice for the transition in previous research may also be attributed to distinctive school ecology. For example, the data in this sample was derived from more than 15 different middle schools to provide a more broad perspective. Even so, ecological aspects of middle schools, such as extracurricular activities, may not be available in all schools. This would influence the frequency of the theme and influence research results. In total, the varied results in perceptions and outcome research on school transitions lend some support for ecological models (e.g., person-environment fit) and further investigation on school context in transition.

The data also appeared to confirm previous research with the consistency of the three main categories of advice relevant to the transition to middle school. While they are not necessarily dichotomous, the consistency of categories throughout transition research suggests that the three groupings of organizational, academic, and personal/social are appropriate target areas of intervention to promote a successful transition to middle school. It is also somewhat surprising that organizational advice was most prevalent, as previous research suggests organizational needs as temporal and most relevant prior to and immediately after a transition (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Although one would expect organization themes as less pervasive for eighth grade students (due to the familiarity), the frequency of organizational advice may indicate a feeling that organizational aspects are most memorable and relevant for new students. Perhaps these data reflect advice for negotiating the major concerns (e.g., getting to class on time, finding lockers, lunch, and bus routes) described in previous research (Weldy, 1990). It is also possible that these data reflect not only a major concern (e.g., larger buildings), but significant positive aspects (e.g., lockers, multiple teachers, moving between classes, lunch, athletics) found in previous student perception research (Akos, 2002; Odegaard & Heath, 1992). It is also possible that organizational advice is most concrete and tangible for students, best highlights the differences between elementary and middle school, and were anticipated as “correct” responses for the testing prompt.

Most middle schools can address these organizational needs for all students with early transition programming or orientation programs. The ecological change can be anticipated based on school ecology and therefore be a base for helping students negotiate the transition. Eccels (1993) recommends ecological aspects such as smaller learning environments, teaming and cooperative learning, empowering teachers, eliminating of tracking, and improving student and teacher relationships as ways to promote a developmentally appropriate person-environment fit. While these ecological aspects may not be present in each middle school, school personnel can strive to manipulate the school environment to match developmental needs. For example, the data suggested that changing and choosing classes are important organization changes in transition. Schools can use team building, school wide orientation programs (e.g., Akos, Masina, & Creamer, in press) to practice class change procedures, and align classroom and building space to minimize the challenges associated with the transition. At minimum, middle schools can prepare students for the significant differences between elementary and middle school (e.g., tours, shadowing programs), the specific middle school culture and ecology, and

resources available at the school. While some can be generalized, these are more aptly distinct by district and by specific school ecology.

For academic advice, previous research has also enumerated the need to address the increasingly demanding academic curriculum and the distinct academic skills that prove useful to achieving in middle school (Mitman & Packer, 1983). Perhaps these students have been recipients of this type of advice throughout middle school and the testing bias influenced students to repeat advice they have received. It is also notable that students provided advice on maintaining good teacher relationships. This theme also emerged in a lesser frequency in personal and social advice (n=22), and is parallel to the goals of smaller learning communities and middle school reform efforts.

The testing context and format of the writing prompt may have contributed to the deeper understanding of the student contribution to negotiating and making a successful transition that emerged from the data. Rather than a school transition happening to them, students can utilize personal agency and influence their own experience in the transition process. This is particularly distinguished in the personal and social advice. While personal and social advice was mentioned less frequently, many themes within the category focused on making and managing friends. The advice from the data coincides with outcome research that suggests the importance of social support and social networks (Berndt, Hawkins, & Jiao, 1999; Wentzel, 2003) in transition. Similar themes about friends also replicate Diemert's (1992) research, where she found personal and social concerns as primary to 5th grade students prior to transition. This data also mirrored previous research from students in the midst of transition who suggested spending time with friends, actively trying to fit in, and ignoring people who pick on them as means to adjust and feel comfortable in middle school (Akos & Galassi, in press). Although social networks are influenced by previous experience and based on one's own social capital, an orientation toward social agency (e.g., meeting new friends) emerged from the data as important to successfully negotiating the transition. Also notable in the personal and social category were the listing of personal qualities that students recommended as important to making a successful transition. Doing your best, being yourself, being nice, and being respectful are characteristics promoted in developmentally responsive middle schools.

Limitations and Future Research

As with any qualitative research, bias is a concern. Although researcher bias was addressed with the methods used in data analysis, data still may be shaped by researcher perspective or the testing bias of the sample. Even so, this investigation provides support to previous transition research on student needs. While Schumacher (1998) is accurate that effective transition programs need to respond to the needs and concerns of students, these data also demonstrate the ways students can and do contribute to making a successful transition.

Additional research should combine student perspectives with examination on how individual and ecological factors relate to differential transition experiences. This data will lead school personnel toward effective transition programming that will support student agency and promoting optimal developmental pathways across school transitions.

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